

Do UN peace operations help forcibly displaced people?

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Abstract

Do UN missions reduce forced displacement? Facing insecure environments, civilians are left with three choices: staying; moving to a safer community; or moving outside their country. Their aspiration and ability to move depend on individual characteristics and macro-level factors, such as the social, economic and political context in which these people live. Research shows that UN missions can impact and reset the macro-level context altered by war, especially in the security and economic domain. However, we lack empirical evidence on whether this impact helps UN peacekeeping tackle forced displacement and returns. This article offers the first global analysis of whether and how UN missions can shape aggregate population movements during civil wars. We combine data on outflows and returns of refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) with data on distinct UN missions' features that we expect to affect population movements, namely the size of their contingents and their mandated tasks. Using matched samples, we find that the unfolding of the outflows and inflows processes are affected by different features of UN missions. Sizeable deployments decrease IDPs flows and encourage their return; refugee outflows, on the other hand, may increase in presence of UN missions. Furthermore, missions with displacement-related mandates are associated with decreasing IDP flows overall, but only encourage refugees' returns.

Keywords

civil wars, forced displacement, peacekeeping, refugees, returns

Introduction

On 5 September 2015, about 3,600 Syrian refugees reached Munich train station after walking from Romania, and German citizens were waiting with candles to give them a warm welcome.¹ The international community had left Syria in August 2012, when the United

Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) withdrew after only four months due to the escalating violence. With a limited observation mandate and fewer than 300 unarmed observers deployed, the mission lacked the capacity to curb violence and prevent the displacement of over 700,000 refugees and more than two million internally displaced people (IDPs) recorded that year (UNHCR, 2021). In the few months since the

¹ 'Cheering German crowds greet refugees after long trek from Budapest to Munich', *Guardian*, 5 September 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/05/refugee-crisis-warm-welcome-for-people-bussed-from-budapest>.

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eruption of the 2013 civil war in South Sudan, more than 400,000 refugees left the country.² The peace operation in South Sudan, which had been working on building state institutions, was unprepared to face the new challenge. The Security Council had to equip it with a new mandate and a higher troop ceiling to tackle the dire humanitarian crisis.

The international community is often expected to prevent refugee flows by containing movements from their countries of origin. For example, when Germany decided to welcome Syrian refugees, several European governments and, more explicitly, the then United Kingdom Prime Minister, David Cameron, stated the international community had to help them in their ‘homes’ rather than in ‘EU homes’.³ However, we lack empirical evidence on whether UN peacekeeping can effectively tackle forced population movements and, if so, which features of missions enable these outcomes. This article fills this gap. This is a crucial matter because forced displacement causes suffering to millions of people and exacerbates the structural weaknesses of developing countries, which host 86% of the world’s refugees (UNHCR, 2021). The total number of forcibly displaced people has been growing worryingly for the last 10 years and reached 89.3 million by the end of 2021.⁴

The aspiration and ability to move of possible refugees depend on macro-level factors, such as the social, economic and political context in which these people live, and individual characteristics. Conflict, persecution and human rights abuses are key drivers of forced displacement because they negatively alter the macro-level context (see e.g. Moore & Shellman, 2006). By improving local security (Bove, Ruffa & Ruggeri, 2020) and economic conditions (Bove, Di Salvatore & Elia, 2021), UN missions also impact and reset the macro-level context altered by war. Thus, if perceived to be effective, such missions should be able to decrease the aspiration to migrate and incentivize the return of formerly displaced households. However, by increasing security and restoring infrastructures, peacekeeping missions are also likely to increase the ability of people to leave, thus possibly having countervailing effects on displacement outflows. The literature on the effectiveness of peacekeeping has hardly addressed these issues.

Table I. Forcibly displaced groups

		<i>Arena</i>	
		<i>Domestic</i>	<i>Transnational</i>
Direction	Outflows	IDPs	Refugees
	Inflows	Returned IDPs	Returned refugees

This article presents the first global analysis of the relationship between UN peace missions and flows of forcibly displaced people, which include refugees and IDPs.⁵ The current shortage of systematic empirical research is partly due to the difficulties involved in investigating these phenomena, most prominently data constraints and the interdependence between outflows and inflows. We discuss both in our theoretical and empirical sections.

In dealing with forced displacement, UN peacekeeping missions are expected to deal with four different groups of people, as shown in Table I: IDPs, refugees, returning IDPs and returning refugees. These four groups are organized across two dimensions: the direction of the flows (outflows or inflows), and whether flows are internal or cross-border. While these flows are distinct in aggregate terms, they are the result of mutually exclusive decisions at the individual level. Those who decide to leave the country will contribute to refugee flows and not to IDPs’. Hence, these flows can be studied as empirically separate aggregate flows, but they are not fully independent from each other.

While UN peace missions may reduce displacement by improving security conditions, they may have differential effects on refugee and IDP flows. Moreover, if UN peace missions can stabilize conflict-ridden countries, they may also encourage refugees and IDPs to return to their homes. Finally, the scholarship shows that the effectiveness of peace operations in reducing violence varies depending on the size of the deployment (Hultman, Kathman & Shannon, 2013) and their mandate (Doyle & Sambanis, 2000; Hultman, Kathman & Shannon, 2013; Di Salvatore et al., 2022). We expect this to translate into heterogenous effects on population flows.

² <https://news.un.org/en/story/2014/07/473692>

³ ‘David Cameron: Taking more and more refugees not answer.’ BBC, 2 September 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-34130067>.

⁴ <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/globaltrends.html> Accessed: 13 January 2023

⁵ We adhere to the UNHCR definitions of the two terms, as our empirical analysis relies on the data that the UNHCR collected based on these definitions. Since 2007, people living in refugee-like and IDP-like situations also qualify as refugees and IDPs even if their status has not been ascertained. All definitions, including those of returned refugees and returned IDPs, can be found at: <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics-uat/methodology/definition/>.

Taking stock of this complex scenario, we argue that the UN missions' capability and strategic goals may affect the aspiration and ability of civilians in war – and thus the population flows in Table I – heterogeneously. This requires theorizing different relations between UN missions and each of the four groups, but also ensures that their interrelatedness is considered in the empirical analysis. In other words, while missions may have an impact on one flow but not on the other, the empirical analysis should consider that these flows are interrelated, even if heterogeneously affected by peacekeepers.

To achieve the empirical goal above, we combine matching techniques and seemingly unrelated regression models on a global sample of 74 countries (1998–2015) to evaluate whether and how the presence, size and mandate of UN missions affect the magnitude of forced displacement. The sample includes all countries that are affected by civil war or are within 10 years of a terminated civil war between 1998 and 2015. Within the sample of 74 countries, 32 hosted a UN peacekeeping mission.

Our research contributes to the literature on peacekeeping effectiveness by introducing an analytical framework to organize empirical analyses on the effects of UN operations on forcibly displaced people. We model data on such people by (a) tackling selection problems on observable factors, (b) accounting for the interdependence among the phenomena, and (c) by addressing the possible non-random missingness of data on refugees.⁶ Finally, our analysis entails key findings that can inform policymaking. It systematically shows that flows respond to UN deployments in different ways and to different extents. It is thus crucial to plan policies regarding these phenomena possibly following different causal paths. Large deployments are associated with decreasing IDP flows, but not fewer refugees. Mission mandates do matter, but once again, heterogeneously: missions with a mandate to tackle forcible displacement successfully decrease IDP flows, but not refugee flows. These same mandates seem to encourage the returns of refugees, but not of IDPs. Hence, while the analysis provides mixed results on the effectiveness of peace missions at helping displaced people, we believe it represents an important starting point to learn and improve UN missions' effectiveness in relation to displacement problems. If the age

of complex peace missions with maximalist goals seems coming to an end, some key, specific tasks can still be carried out effectively by well-designed UN operations.

What we know, what we do not know

In its attempts to secure peace, the UN has become increasingly aware of the challenges linked with population movements. In fact, the available scholarship shows that forced displacement is a direct consequence of insecurity, and therefore it is inherently connected with UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding goals.

On violence and forced displacement

A solid body of literature has demonstrated that civil wars and mass atrocities are the main causes of massive refugee flows and IDPs (e.g. Moore & Shellman, 2004; Neumayer, 2005). Davenport and co-authors provide shocking figures about conflicts and the size of refugee flows: 'A civil war lasting for ten years is apt to be associated with about 744,000 refugees in its tenth year. A genocide or politicide occurring over the same period would be associated with about 574,000 persons choosing to flee' (Davenport, Moore & Poe, 2003: 44). Government violence represents the major push factor and population flows are particularly massive if refugees can easily flee to relatively wealthy and democratic countries, rather than to poor or authoritarian ones (Moore & Shellman, 2006).

More recently, studies have turned to IDPs, using spatially disaggregated data about population movements and conflict dynamics. However, to the best of our knowledge, this scholarship focuses on case studies of single countries, and we lack a large-N study on the dynamics of internal displacement. Nonetheless, conflict-related violence is also identified as the key driver of internal displacement in Indonesian Aceh (Czaika & Kis-Katos, 2009) and Nepal (Adhikari, 2012, 2013). However, the presence of a police station in a village appears to reduce population outflows and increase returns, as it is associated with more security (Czaika & Kis-Katos, 2009). Violence against civilians is particularly crucial to understanding IDP flows, both in conventional and in irregular civil wars. Balcells & Steele (2016) show that localities where residents were perceived to be loyal to rival armed groups experienced higher levels of displacement both in the Spanish and in the Colombian civil wars. Moreover, the choice of destination is also affected by the type of violence. Displaced people will tend to select different locations depending on their expectation that they will be targeted by selective

⁶ Data on refugees may be systematically (non-randomly) missing in cases without a UN mission. Thus, the representativeness of the data can be reduced by this association with UN missions. We tackle this problem in the empirical section.

or indiscriminate violence (Steele, 2009). Finally, just as refugees increase the likelihood of conflict diffusion to neighbouring states (Böhmelt, Bove & Gleditsch, 2019), IDPs tend to spread conflict within the state to areas where they move, either because they attract rebel violence or because they may seek to change their livelihood situation through violence (Bohnet, Cottier & Hug, 2018).

Notably, most of the literature on the causes of forced displacement focuses either on refugees or IDPs; only very few studies perform simultaneous analyses of both types of displacement flows. Moore & Shellman (2007) is a noteworthy exception that advances and tests early explanatory hypotheses on country features that influence the two forms of displacement. Another interesting exception is Echevarria-Coco & Gardezabal (2021), who propose a model linking conflict intensity and displacement, introducing spatial variables that can affect the proportion of refugees and IDPs simultaneously. In our analysis on the relationship between UN missions and population flows, we consider some of the spatial dynamics identified by Echevarria-Coco & Gardezabal (2021), by accounting for how the geographical spread of the conflict within a country affects the decision to cross the border. Thus, we lack an established theory explaining whether displaced individuals will become refugees and IDPs, or clarifying the interdependence between the two resulting flows. In a recent study, Schon (2020) stresses that civilian networks and resource endowments are the two core axes we should focus on to understand refugees' decisions. Providing evidence from Syrian refugees, he finds that individuals 'develop motivation based on their narrative-based understandings of violent threat' (Schon, 2020: 176) and depending on how violence impacts their social networks. However, opportunity is also necessary to decide if and how to flee. This opportunity depends on resource endowments in the form of advantaged socioeconomic status (Schon, 2020: 176).

Furthermore, we still know very little about the factors driving returns of refugees and IDPs. Very few studies investigate the conditions under which forcibly displaced people are likely to return. The few studies available focus on single cases of conflict and mainly on refugees rather than IDPs. Considering that violence, conflict and insecurity constitute the main causes of displacement, it is *prima facie* reasonable to assume that refugees and IDPs are likely to return home when security is restored: this is the basic lesson that we can draw from the wars in the Balkans during the 1990s (e.g. Stefanovic & Loizides, 2017). However, it also appears that in various cases refugees return to their home

countries despite ongoing conflict, especially when civil wars continue for many years (Stein & Cuny, 1994; Chu, 2020). In these cases, we must consider that the dynamics of violence in civil wars can change significantly over time, for instance because of external interventions. In a recent study, Ghosn et al. (2021) argue that the decision of refugees to return home can be affected by, among other things, the involvement and the policies of international organizations that are providing aid and relief. Although further research is still needed, at the moment the only clear factor related to returns seems to be the perception of increased security and stability (Kaya & Orchard, 2020).

On UN peace operations and forcibly displaced people

The identification of violence as a key driver of displacement would be sufficient to warrant attention from the international community, particularly from the UN. Considering the link between violence, perceived local security and displacement, it seems reasonable to ask whether peacekeeping missions can do anything to mitigate flows of refugees and favour the return of forcibly displaced people to their homes, and whether the UN missions deployed so far have had any effect on this matter. In fact, while some studies have set out the problems experienced by some specific UN missions deployed in the early 1990s (e.g. Costalli, 2014), many other studies have found that robust peacekeeping operations can reduce violence during civil wars (Hultman, Kathman & Shannon, 2013; 2019) and increase the likelihood of lasting peace after the end of armed clashes (Fortna, 2008). More recent studies have shown that large peacekeeping missions deployed in ongoing conflicts also reduce the average time to a negotiated solution of the war (Kathman & Benson, 2019), and that higher levels of perceived and observed security linked to peacekeeping operations in conflict and post-conflict countries can improve local economies (Bove, Di Salvatore & Elia, 2021), favour peaceful mobilization (Belgioioso, Di Salvatore, & Pinckney, 2021) and increase educational attainment (Reeder & Polizzi, 2021).

Surprisingly, however, there is almost no research on the relationship between peacekeeping missions and flows of forcibly displaced people stemming from conflicts. Beardsley (2011) deals with the effect of UN missions on the transnational dynamics of violence in civil wars, finding that the deployment of peacekeepers strongly mitigates the risk of conflict contagion to neighbouring countries, while Uzonyi (2015) shows that states fearing refugee inflows from ongoing conflicts are more

likely to contribute to peacekeeping missions. Sundberg (2020) is the study that is most closely connected with ours, but it focuses only on South Sudan and only on IDPs, without reaching any firm conclusion. Neither deploying peacekeeping troops in South Sudanese counties, nor increasing the number seem to have had any clear effect on the dynamics of internal displacement (Sundberg, 2020). However, the data used in the analysis show severe and partly unsolvable problems with the non-random assignment of peacekeeping troops, thus calling for additional research, possibly including other case studies.

According to anecdotal information from the UN, the creation of a safer environment, in combination with humanitarian mandates, seems to have helped refugees, at least in some cases. For instance, in a 2021 review, the UN highlighted that in Mali the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA)'s presence in the country remained essential because some 400,000 people were forced to flee their homes due to conflict. Around 4.7 million were reliant on some form of humanitarian aid and the provision of security by the blue helmets was essential.⁷ Similarly, in Burundi, according to the UN, 'Since national reconciliation in Burundi – supported by the UN peacekeeping operation there (ONUB) – some 500,000 refugees have returned home'.⁸

Considering the scant literature about various aspects of this study area, and especially about the effects of peacekeeping operations on flows of forcibly displaced people, the importance of these flows for contemporary international politics and human security, and the fact that peacekeeping operations constitute one of the main tools that the international community has to intervene in security and humanitarian crises, we suggest that it is crucial to promote more research on this topic. We believe that our explorative study can provide useful hints to attract more efforts in this area.

Analytical framework and empirical expectations

The flows of forcibly displaced people can usefully be analysed, as any other migration flow, through the aspiration–ability framework (Carling, 2002; Carling &

Schewel, 2018; Schon, 2020). This two-step analytical approach conceives population movements distinguishing the aspiration of possible migrants (whether they want to move) from their ability (whether they actually can). Each of these two factors is simultaneously determined by macro-level factors, such as the social, economic and political context in which possible migrants live, and by individual characteristics. Hence, even though the decision of individuals is rooted at the micro-foundational level, the macro context creates constraints of actions. It is indeed important to understand the pull and push factors that influence individuals' decisions to leave or return (Schon, 2020; Ghosn et al., 2021), but the macro context and, therefore, the relative aggregated observability remain critical. This is particularly true for armed conflicts, as they dramatically alter all relevant dimensions of the macro context where individuals decide whether to stay, flee or return.

Violent conflicts reduce security, disrupt the provision of services and cause economic mayhem. As a result, the aspiration to move of populations of countries involved in wars generally increases, and we know from the available literature that violence and the reduction of economic opportunities caused by wars are strongly linked to forced displacement (e.g. Moore & Shellman, 2004; Schon, 2019). Wars can also jeopardize the ability of people in conflict-ridden countries to move, since roads can become dangerous, infrastructures can be destroyed and public transports are often unavailable. Nonetheless, we know that wars are strongly associated with flows of forcibly displaced people, and this means that the decreased ability is more than compensated by the increased aspiration. However, ability differs both in peace and in war, thus leading to two different flows of conflict-induced migration: refugees and IDPs, depending on factors such as distance from the border, features of the neighbouring countries and mobility issues such as the ones mentioned above.

Peacekeeping operations deter fighting groups, defend civilians, monitor civilian infrastructures, assist displaced people and so doing increase security (Bove, Ruffa & Ruggeri, 2020) and improve economic conditions (Bove, Di Salvatore & Elia, 2021). Thus, UN missions also impact and reset the macro-level context altered by war and, if perceived to be effective, they should be able to decrease the aspiration to migrate. However, increasing security and restoring infrastructures, peacekeeping missions are also likely to increase the ability of people to leave, thus having a possible balancing effect on migration outflows, although reversing the impact of war on aspirations and abilities.

What about refugees and IDPs who left their homes before the deployment of UN peacekeepers? How are their

⁷ UN News, 28 December 2021, '2021 Year in Review: UN support for countries in conflict' <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/12/1108352>.

⁸ UN News, April 2010, 'UN agency lauds Tanzania's move to naturalize '1972 Burundian refugees'' <https://news.un.org/en/story/2010/04/335522-un-agency-lauds-tanzanias-move-naturalize-1972-burundian-refugees>.

aspiration and ability to move back affected by the peacekeeping missions? As mentioned above, despite the minimal research on returns, one of the few consistent findings is that the security environment of the home country is a crucial determinant of returns. Therefore, considering that, on average, peacekeeping missions can re-establish a safer environment, we argue they should affect the macro-level context of displaced people in such a way as to have a positive effect both on their aspiration and on their ability to return home. Thus, while the effect of peacekeeping missions on outflows of refugees and IDPs could be controversial and multidirectional, their effect on returns should be more straightforward. UN agencies have also expressed very optimistic statements about the effects of UN missions on returning refugees, although not supported by systematic evidence: ‘The UN refugee agency has welcomed the deployment of the UN Mission in Liberia to rebel-held areas, saying this will pave the way for the return of displaced Liberians and allow UNHCR to start its reintegration programme in the coming weeks.’⁹

Previous studies have generally found that the size – rather than the simple presence – of missions matters, as larger missions are more likely to reduce violence and increase local security (Hultman, Kathman & Shannon, 2013; Ruggeri, Gizelis & Dorussen, 2013). Hence, in line with the previous research, we expect that the size of peacekeeping operations should be more important than their mere presence to influence the aspiration and ability of affected populations, and in turn, reduce forced displacement and encourage returns. This is because sizeable missions are more likely to be perceived as effective by civilians who are considering leaving and by people who are already displaced. Thus, larger missions are more likely to shape their aspiration to move and, mindful of the contrasting effect that peacekeeping missions can have on the aspiration and ability of possible migrants, we evaluate the two following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Larger UN peacekeeping deployments decrease displacement (i.e. refugee and IDP flows).

Hypothesis 2: Larger UN peacekeeping deployments encourage the return of previously displaced people.

However, as we have mentioned, our framework also considers variations in the design of peacekeeping missions to understand how the international community can address forced displacement through this conflict-mitigation tool. UN peacekeeping missions are assigned different mandates by the UN Security Council, but the scholarship on peacekeeping has not yet evaluated how specific mandated tasks shape the blue helmets’ capacity to prevent or contain forced displacement. We explore this new path of research and posit that mandates are important for at least two reasons: first, missions with different mandates perform different activities on the ground; and second, different mandates send different signals to civilians under threat. Hence, missions’ mandates can affect both aspirations and abilities of forcibly displaced people.

In relation to the first point, we argue that not all mandates (and the activities they entail) are equally significant for forced displacement, and therefore that not all missions will be equally effective in dealing with such problems. Thus, we focus on protection of civilians (PoC) mandates and displacement mandates. In line with the argument that peacekeepers save lives, one would expect missions that are mandated to protect civilians to further improve their security conditions. Indeed, PoC mandates are found to foster mission effectiveness by reducing one-sided violence more than so-called robust mandates do (Hultman, 2010). Thus, we would also expect this type of mission to be among the ones that are more likely to impact the macro-level context of possible migrants reducing their aspiration to leave, but possibly also increasing their ability, if they are not perceived as decisive to end the conflict. In relation to people who are already displaced, however, missions with PoC mandates, if perceived effective, should be likely to increase both their aspiration and their ability to move back, thus stimulating flows of returnees.

As the UN peacekeeping has become more concerned with population movements, several mandates have started including provisions in support of IDPs, refugees and returnees, although these displacement-related tasks do not always explicitly indicate that protection will be provided. Decreasing outflows is a challenging goal, since these missions are also bound by their humanitarian nature to assist moving migrants, thus increasing the migrants’ ability to leave. Nevertheless, missions with such mandates are the most likely to effectively shape civilians’ aspiration and ability to move. Specifically, regarding returns, these mandates also include support for voluntary and safe returns and resettlements. Hence,

⁹ ‘UNHCR set to reintegrate Liberian returnees with UNMIL expansion’ <https://www.unhcr.org/africa/news/news/unhcr-set-reintegrate-liberian-returnees-unmil-expansion#:~:text=Home,UNHCR%20set%20to%20reintegrate%20Liberian%20returnees%20with%20UNMIL%20expansion,programme%20in%20the%20coming%20weeks.>

displacement mandates should encourage returns of refugees and IDPs.

A few reports from UN missions have also perceived and stressed the importance of having specific mandates to help refugees and IDPs. For instance, the UNOCI mission, which operated in Ivory Coast between 2004 and 2017, was mandated to implement actions to support displaced population. According to UN Security Council Resolution 2226 (2015), the UN mission was recommended to ‘support the Ivorian authorities in preparing for the voluntary, safe and sustainable return of refugees and internally displaced persons in cooperation with relevant humanitarian organisations and in creating security conditions conducive to it’.¹⁰ In Sierra Leone, UNAMISIL had a central role for returnees: the mission ‘assisted more than half a million Sierra Leonean refugees and internally displaced persons to return home and supported training for thousands of local police’.¹¹

Thus, we posit that the effect of mandates on flows is not only task-dependent but also flow-specific. Refugee, IDP and returnee flows are shaped heterogeneously by mandates. More specifically, we expect that:

Hypothesis 3: UN missions with protection of civilians’ mandate decrease refugee and IDP flows.

Hypothesis 4: UN missions with protection of civilians’ mandate increase returns of refugees and IDPs.

Hypothesis 5: UN missions with displacement mandates decrease refugee and IDP flows.

Hypothesis 6: UN missions with displacement mandates increase returns of refugees and IDPs.

Notably, the assumption here is that mandating a mission with a task also means allocating resources to that task. No systematic information on whether this is the case or not is available.¹²

In the empirical section, we provide the first assessment of whether peacekeeping missions affect forced displacement directly as a result of the security umbrella they provide (i.e. according to their size) and according to their mandates, which enable activities that can improve the safety of forcibly displaced people.

Research design

Data

Our empirical analysis is based on a monadic, country-year, time-series, cross-sectional dataset that includes 74 countries that experienced a civil war in the previous 10 years (with 32 hosting a UN peacekeeping mission at one point), with a temporal span covering 1998–2015. We start from 1998 as the data on returning IDPs are available only from that year; hence, we use that starting date for all other population flows for comparability purposes.¹³ Our four dependent variables measuring yearly population movements at the country level are: number of refugees; number of internally displaced people; returned refugees; and returned IDPs. All variables are based on the UNHCR data (UNHCR, 2020).¹⁴ These data are the standard reference for large-N studies on forced displacement and have been used in a wide number of contributions investigating the relations between conflict, repression, development and population movements (e.g. Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006; Echevarria & Gardeazabal, 2016; Böhmelt, Bove & Gleditsch, 2019). However, Marbach (2018) highlights a problem of non-random missingness in the UNHCR data on refugees and proposes an imputation method to deal with such issue. Therefore, we rely on Marbach’s imputed data (2018) for the refugee flow variable. All the count variables are logged to reduce the influence of potential outliers.

The historical and global trend of refugees in Figure 1 shows an increase in the last few years of both refugees and IDPs. It should be noted that we are not reporting the overall number of cases, but of cases in countries that have experienced a civil war in the previous 10 years. According to the 2020 UNHCR report, above 1% of the world’s population – or 1 in 95 people – is now forcibly displaced. Four countries among the top 10 countries of origin of forcibly displaced people have currently active UN missions: 2.2 million refugees originate

¹⁰ <https://onuci.unmissions.org/en/unoci-chief-appeals-return-ivorian-refugees>, December 2015

¹¹ UN News, March 2014 ‘Drawing down – the end of UN Peace Operations in Sierra Leone’ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2014/03/465102-feature-drawing-down-end-un-peace-operations-sierra-leone>.

¹² In fact, ambitious and complex mandates are often more difficult to implement (Blair, Di Salvatore & Smidt, 2022). This implies that it is difficult to single out the effect of one task within a complex or multidimensional mandate as the two (task and overall mandate) cannot be separated empirically. We would expect that, given the growing complexity of peacekeeping mandates, our analysis is likely to underestimate the association between population flows and protection and displacement tasks.

¹³ Our results hold when replicating our analysis on the 1991–2015 sample for which data on refugees, IDPs and returning refugees are available.

¹⁴ See <http://popstats.unhcr.org/en/overview>

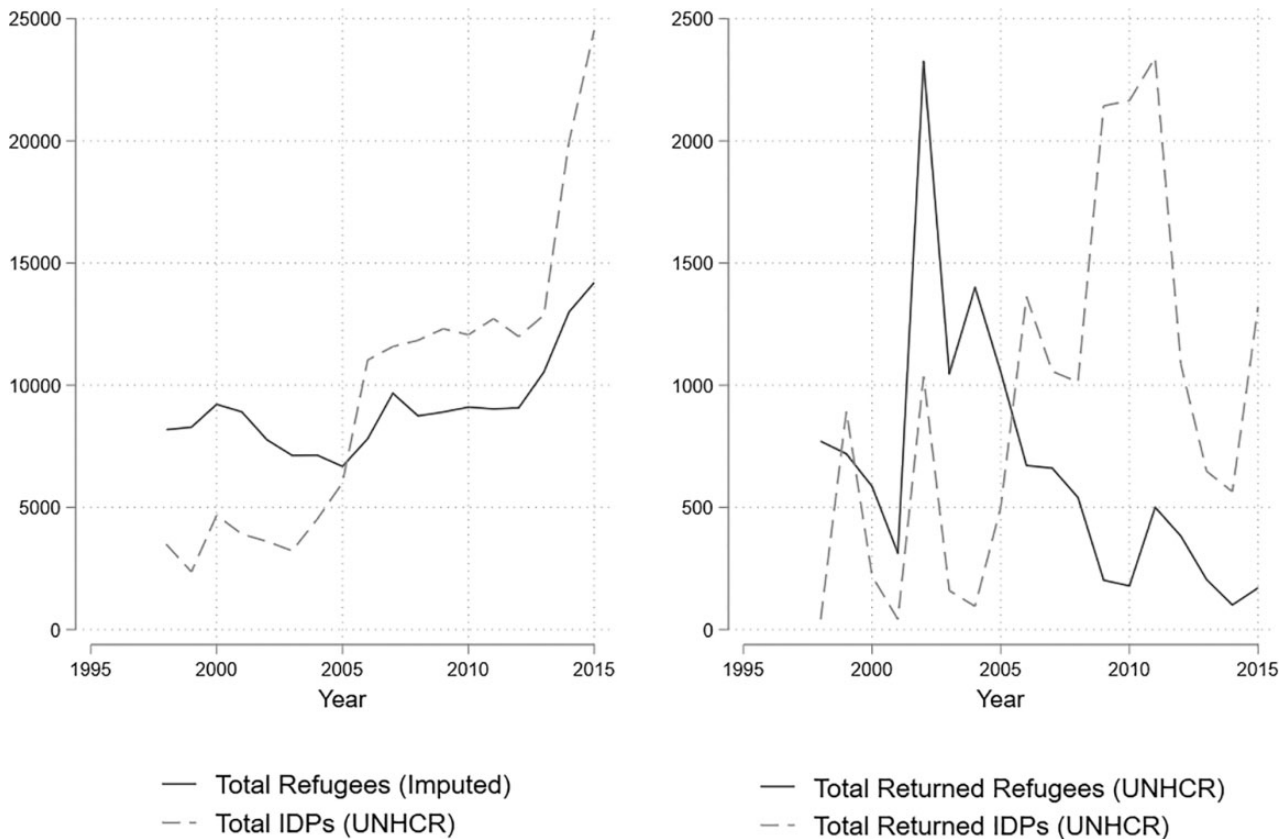


Figure 1. Refugee, IDP and returnee flows (in thousands)

from South Sudan; 900,000 refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo; the same figure from Sudan; and 600,000 from the Central African Republic. Moreover, the Democratic Republic of the Congo has 5.2 million IDPs, Sudan 2.6, and South Sudan 1.6. In 2020, 3.4 million displaced people returned to their areas of origin.

Figure 1 shows trends of outflows (refugees and IDPs in the left panel) and inflows (returned refugees and IDPs in the right panel).¹⁵

Our three main independent variables are UN peacekeeping presence and military deployment size, both based on the International Peace Institute database,¹⁶ and mandate type. We use information on UN presence and size to test Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2. To obtain information on the mandates, we rely on the

peacekeeping mandates dataset (PEMA, Di Salvatore et al., 2022). The dataset codes all UN peacekeeping mission in Africa since 1991 and identifies changes in mandated tasks throughout the life cycle of missions. Among the 41 tasks coded, PEMA includes information on the PoC and displacement-related tasks that allow us to test Hypothesis 3, Hypothesis 4, Hypothesis 5 and Hypothesis 6. Out of the 44 countries that had a peacekeeping mission between 1991 and 2019, PEMA includes 27 missions in 17 African countries.

Figures 2 and 3 show the evolution of peacekeeping mandates in relation to the provision of the two key tasks we are interested in: PoC (Figure 2) and displacement mandates (Figure 3). Numerous contemporary missions are mandated to both protect civilians and perform displacement-related functions. In authorizing PoC tasks, the Security Council often requires a mission to '[e]nsure, within its area of operations, effective protection of civilians under threat of physical violence, including through active patrolling' (UNSC resolution S/RES/2147). In some cases, these functions are performed with the government, though this is not always the case.

¹⁵ UNHCR collected data on IDP returnees starting in 1997; see their methodology at <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/methodology/>. To be noted the difference of scale on the vertical axis of the two graphs.

¹⁶ Data at <https://www.ipinst.org/providing-for-peacekeeping-database>.

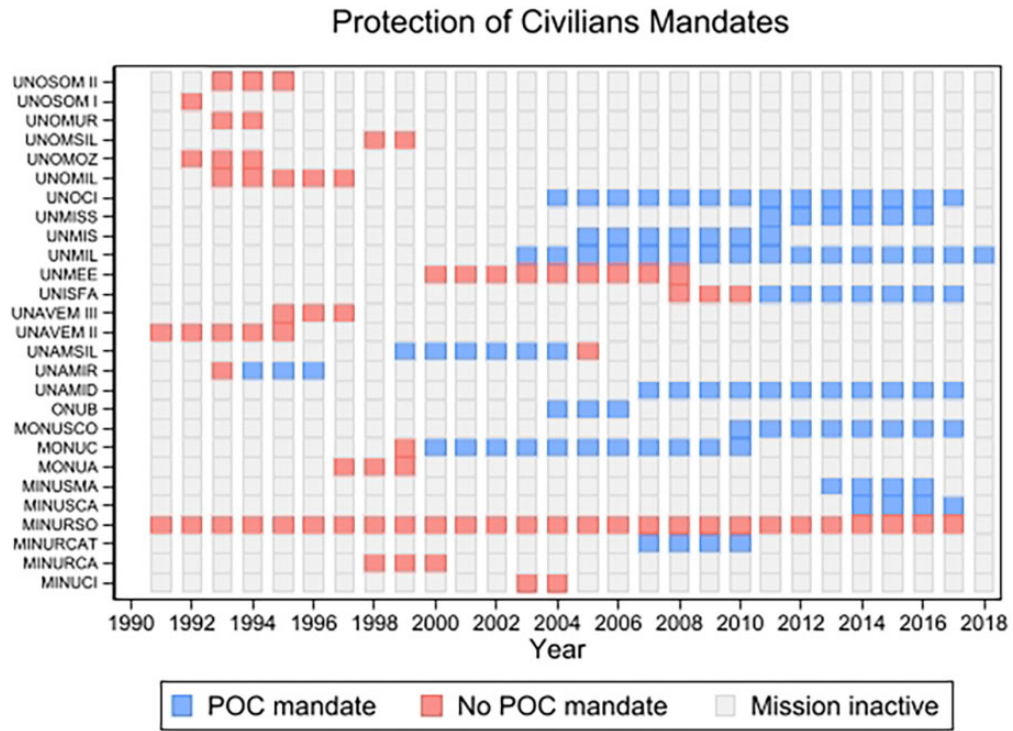


Figure 2. UN missions by protection of civilians mandate (PEMA data)

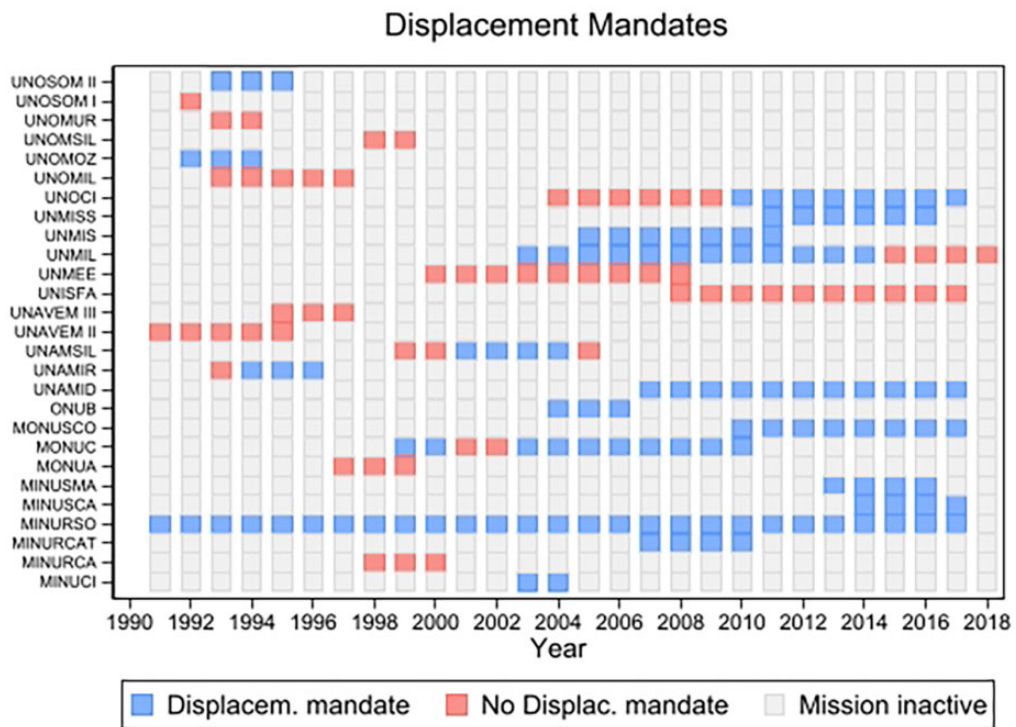


Figure 3. UN missions by displacement mandate (PEMA data)

Displacement-related tasks cover a more diverse set of tasks, all of which, however, involve some provision of security to refugees, IDPs and/or returnees. Other tasks involve assistance for the delivery of humanitarian relief to displaced people. For example, the United Nations Mission in Côte d'Ivoire (MINUCI) had a mandate 'to support efforts to find safe and durable solutions for refugees and displaced persons' (UNSC resolution S/RES/1479), while the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) had the more complex task of:

the creation of a secure environment for the immediate, full, safe and unhindered, civilian-led delivery of humanitarian assistance [...] and for the voluntary safe, dignified and sustainable return of internally displaced persons and refugees in close coordination with humanitarian actors (UNSC resolution S/RES/2149).

In addition to security and assistance, PEMA also codes tasks where the mission is requested to monitor the situation, or is simply encouraged rather than requested to provide support or security. We code missions according to whether they are requested to assist or provide security in the domain of civilian protection and displacement.

Our models' specifications also include a battery of control variables that could affect the variation in the amount of forcibly displaced people as a consequence of conflict. First, we use the PRIO Grid Data (Tollefsen et al., 2012) to compute the share of a country's territory affected by ongoing civil conflict violence in a given year according to the UCDP-GED data (Sundberg & Melander, 2013). In this way, we obtain a percentage value indicating the geographical extension of violent conflict for each country in a country-year. In fact, since civil wars impact countries where they occur differently, they are also likely to alter civilians' aspiration and ability to leave depending on how much they affect the macro context. We introduce both a linear and a quadratic term of this control variable in our statistical models to gauge possible non-linearity between this proxy of country conflict extension and the dynamics of displacement and return. Moreover, as highlighted in previous literature, the type of political regime and the respect for physical integrity in a country are major correlates with refugee flows; we therefore control for regime using the Polity scale (Marshall et al., 2002) and physical integrity using data from the CIRI project (Cingranelli & Richards, 2010).

We model conflict history using cubic polynomials (Carter & Signorino, 2010) based on UCDP-PRIO data (Gleditsch et al., 2002) and control for the total population of the country at war, since the dependent variables are clearly related to population size and the level of wealth in a country, proxied by GDP per capita (Gleditsch, 2002). All our control variables are lagged by one year to avoid simultaneity bias.

Estimation

Our estimation strategy is informed by the consideration that UN peacekeeping missions are deployed non-randomly to different settings. To alleviate concerns over covariate imbalance, particularly in pre-deployment characteristics, we implement two different matching strategies, depending on the treatment. We begin by checking imbalances between the treated and untreated samples for the following pre-treatment variables that could affect the likelihood of the treatment: IDPs, refugees, physical integrity, number of previous years at peace before conflict, population, GDP per capita, level of democracy/autocracy (as measured by the Polity scale) and infant mortality rate. All are measured as average levels five years before the UN operations' deployment starts. We find that the most imbalanced variables are physical integrity, GDP per capita and regime type (as measured by the Polity scale). Hence, we use the Coarsened Exact Matching (CEM) introduced by Iacus, King & Porro (2011) to assign weights to observations so that these are more balanced on the three covariates. We understand matching cannot resolve non-random assignment due to unobservable factors, yet the sources of selective deployment have been widely studied (Ruggeri, Dorussen & Gizelis, 2018) and matching has become the standard procedure in the peace operations literature to mitigate possible inferential biases (Di Salvatore & Ruggeri, 2017). First, we match countries that experienced civil wars (i.e. our entire sample) based on whether they received a UN mission or not. Second, we match African countries that hosted a UN mission to have a balanced sample and compare missions with and without displacement mandates. Again, the decision to provide a mission with a specific mandate cannot be assumed to be a random policy. In both cases, we consider five-year and three-year pre-deployment characteristics to ensure the results are not driven by the selection of the pre-treatment window. We add population as covariate for this second matching given the high imbalance on this variable. We show results with the five-year window

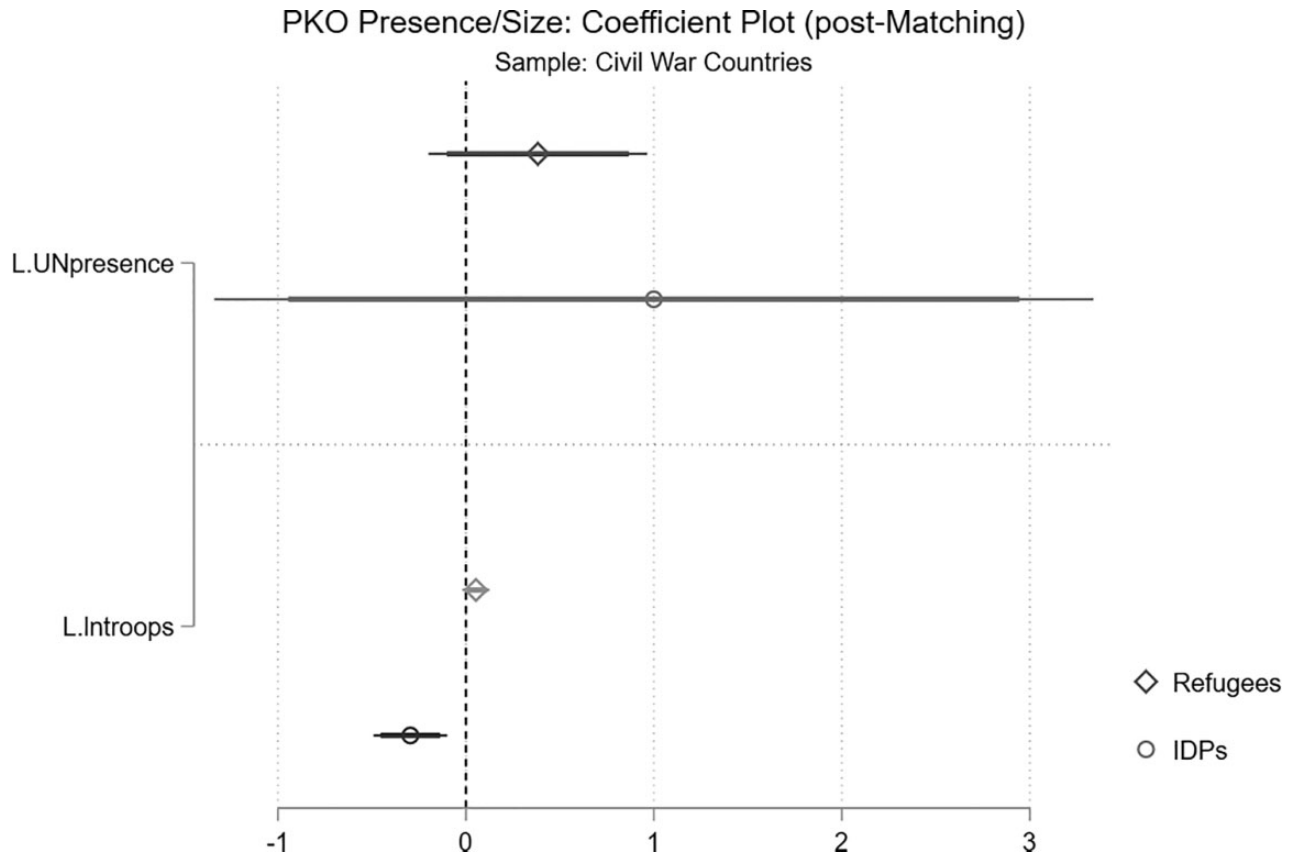


Figure 4. UN peacekeeping operation presence, size and impact on refugee and IDP flows (logged): 90% and 95% confidence intervals

while the three-year window results can be found in the Online appendix.

The matching algorithm is subsequently used to detect the matches within the coarsened data and to put aside the unmatched cases.¹⁷ After having matched our sample, we use ordinary least squares (OLS) models with year and country fixed-effects and clustered standard errors by country to gauge within-country variation and unobserved heterogeneity of the units. In fact, migration aspirations also depend on context-specific social norms and meanings (Carling & Schewel, 2018).

In the Online appendix, we consider another inferential problem. Two of our dependent variables are likely

to have non-independent data-generating processes. Refugees and IDP flows could be expected to depend on each other to some degree. Considering the pool of individuals leaving their homes as fixed, more IDPs will also mean fewer refugees. To tackle this possible shortcoming, we assess the relationship between UN peacekeeping and refugees and IDP flows simultaneously in a seemingly unrelated regression (SUR) setup (Tomz, Tucker & Wittenberg, 2002). In contrast to research that studies the two phenomena almost in full isolation, we explicitly consider that the size of the two flows is correlated and show that our results are consistent with this alternative estimation strategy. However, we do not use the SUR models as our main models, mostly because we cannot combine them with CEM to balance the covariates.

Results

As described in the data section, our analysis involves four different dependent variables – outflows and returns of refugees and IDPs – and four independent variables, capturing different features of UN missions. To simplify the presentation of our empirical analysis, we present

¹⁷ The value of L1 (synthetic index ranging from 0 to 1) before matching for the sample of countries at civil war and with or without UN peace operation treatment was 0.77. CEM substantially reduces L1 to 0.22, providing a much more balanced sample and providing 44 matched cases. When matching observations to evaluate the role of different mandates, we use a reduced sample with African missions only because of the coverage of the mandate dataset. Here, we see that L1 drops from 0.82 to 0.43, and we retain 22 countries.

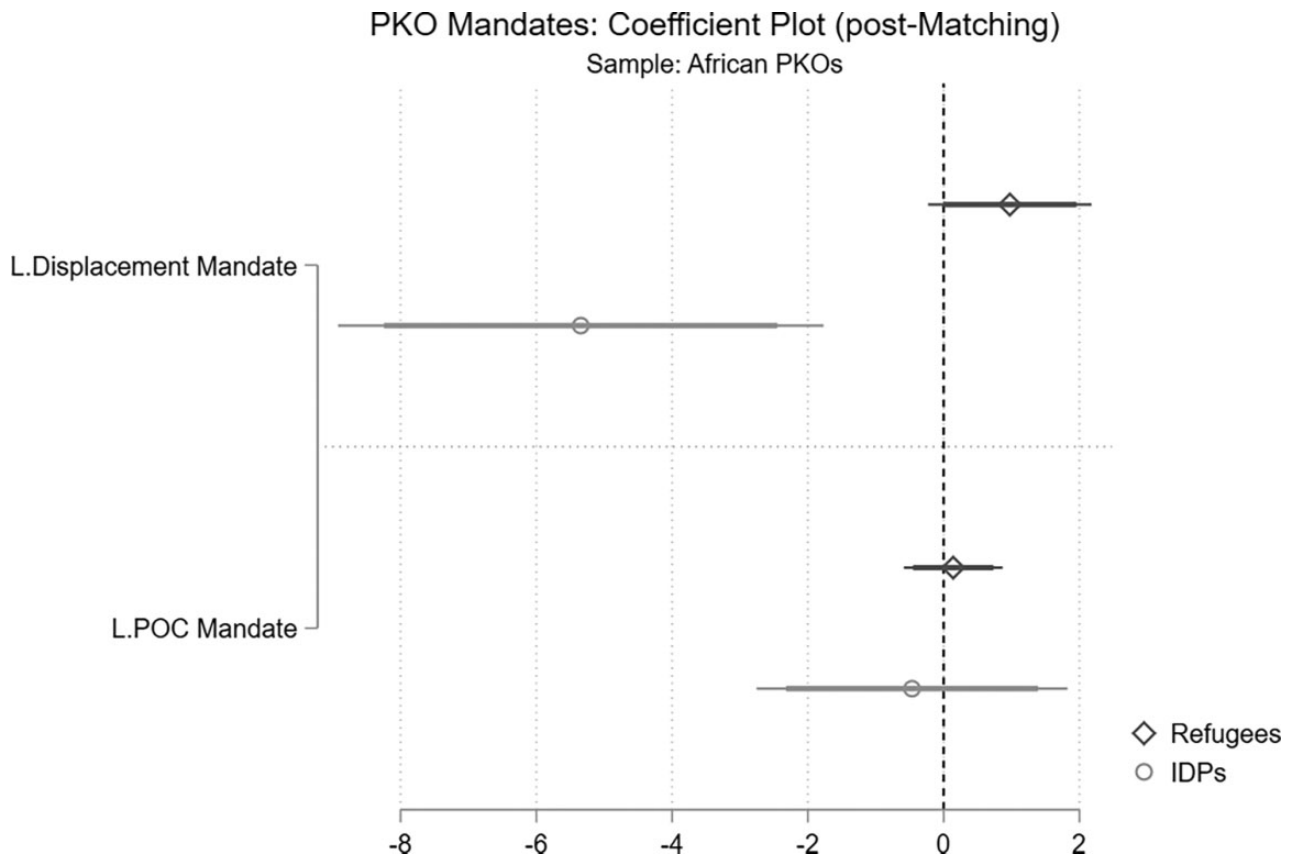


Figure 5. UN peacekeeping operation mandates and impact on refugees and IDP flows (logged): 90% and 95% confidence intervals

figures only showing the results of our variables of interest, while all tables with the complete statistical models and controls can be found in the Online appendix.

Focusing first on the outflows, Figure 4 shows how presence and deployment size of UN peacekeeping missions is associated with outflows of refugees (diamonds in dark grey) and IDPs (circles in light grey) in countries affected by civil wars (either ongoing or in the last 10 years). In line with the findings highlighted by the literature on the effects of peacekeeping on violence, and as expected in our theoretical framework, the mere presence of peacekeeping troops in countries affected by armed conflict does not seem enough to reduce forced displacement. In fact, none of the estimated coefficients of the variable under scrutiny assumes a negative value. If anything, the presence of peacekeeping missions seems associated with more outflows of refugees, although the coefficient is significant only at 10%.

When focusing on size, larger peacekeeping missions have not been more effective than smaller missions at reducing refugee flows. However, the size of peacekeeping missions seems to matter when dealing with IDPs, as larger missions are associated with fewer IDPs, partially

supporting Hypothesis 1. The predicted reduction of IDP flows is also not marginal, as moving from 0 to 500 UN troops reduces IDP outflows in a given year by approximately 80%. We control for several additional factors not reported in Figure 4 but present in Table A1 (Online appendix). It is to be noticed that most of the controls tend to be not statistically significant at standard levels or vary across models explaining different outcomes. Higher violation of physical integrity is only significant (and negative) in models when controlling for UN presence but loses significance in models where the size of missions is included. The geographic diffusion of the conflict increases the number of IDPs, but again only in one specification. On the other hand, higher GDP per capita correlates with fewer outflows and larger populations with larger outflows.

Figure 5 shows the results of our analysis on the relative effectiveness of missions with different mandates at dealing with outflows of forcibly displaced persons. UN peacekeeping missions that received a specific mandate to take care of displaced people have noticeably reduced IDP flows, but do not significantly reduce refugee flows, partially confirming Hypothesis 5. It is worth noting,

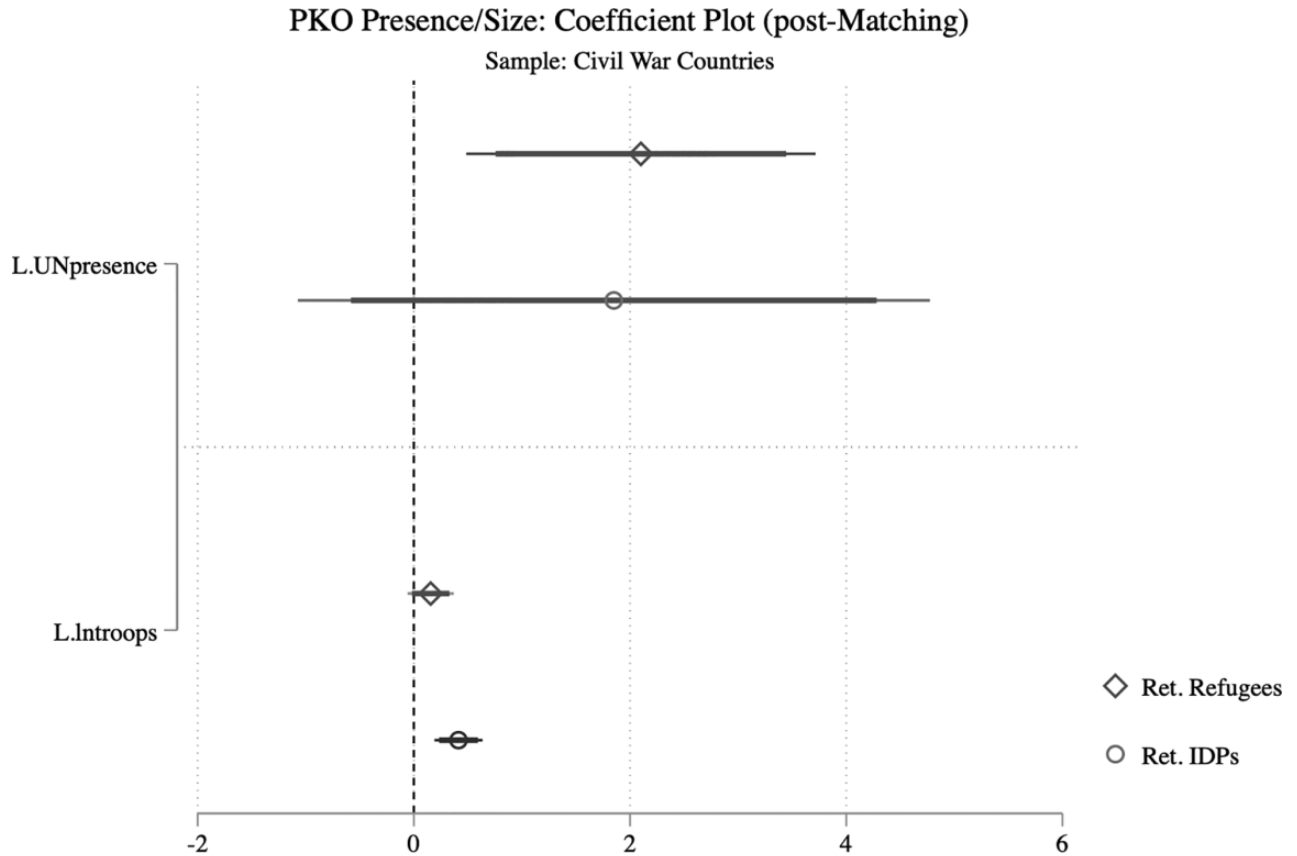


Figure 6. UN peacekeeping operation presence, size and impact on returning refugees and IDP flows: 90% and 95% confidence intervals

however, that, probably because of a relatively small sample due to the mandate data, the coefficient of the displacement-related mandate is statistically significant but has very wide confidence intervals. These do not affect the significance of the coefficient but result in very high predicted changes in IDP flows as a result of the inclusion of a displacement-related task in a mandate – approximately a 90% reduction in IDP flows. Surprisingly, missions with a mandate to protect do not seem to reduce either flow, hence not providing any evidence in support for Hypothesis 3. This may also be the result of this mandates becoming increasingly common to all UN missions.

IDP and refugee outflows are distinct but strictly connected phenomena, as individuals who experience or are threatened by violence and decide to leave their homes have to decide between remaining in their country and escaping abroad (Moore & Shellman, 2006; Echevarria-Coco & Gardeazabal, 2021). For this reason, we decide to consider the two phenomena in a SUR setting in our Online appendix (Table A4). The SUR model shows that UN troops may reduce IDP flows, but not refugee

flows, hence providing partial support for Hypothesis 1 as our CEM models do. In fact, we find that size and presence of UN peacekeepers positively correlate with the number of refugees leaving a country when accounting for those who are internally displaced. PoC mandates remain not significant, while displacement mandates can reduce IDP flows but increase refugee flows. It should be noted that although the SUR models can account for the interdependence of refugee and IDP flows, we cannot account for pre-deployment factors related to the decision to deploy and thus for the resulting selection bias. Therefore, we tend to favour the results of post-matching OLS regressions and we interpret the SUR results as additional evidence of the matching strategy’s soundness.

We now turn to the relation between peacekeeping missions and returns of refugees and IDPs to their homes (Figures 6 and 7). We have previously mentioned how complex this process is, and there are many facets that still require further research. Refugee and IDP returns involve many factors at different levels of analysis, from individual preferences to the policies of states and international organizations. Nonetheless, the

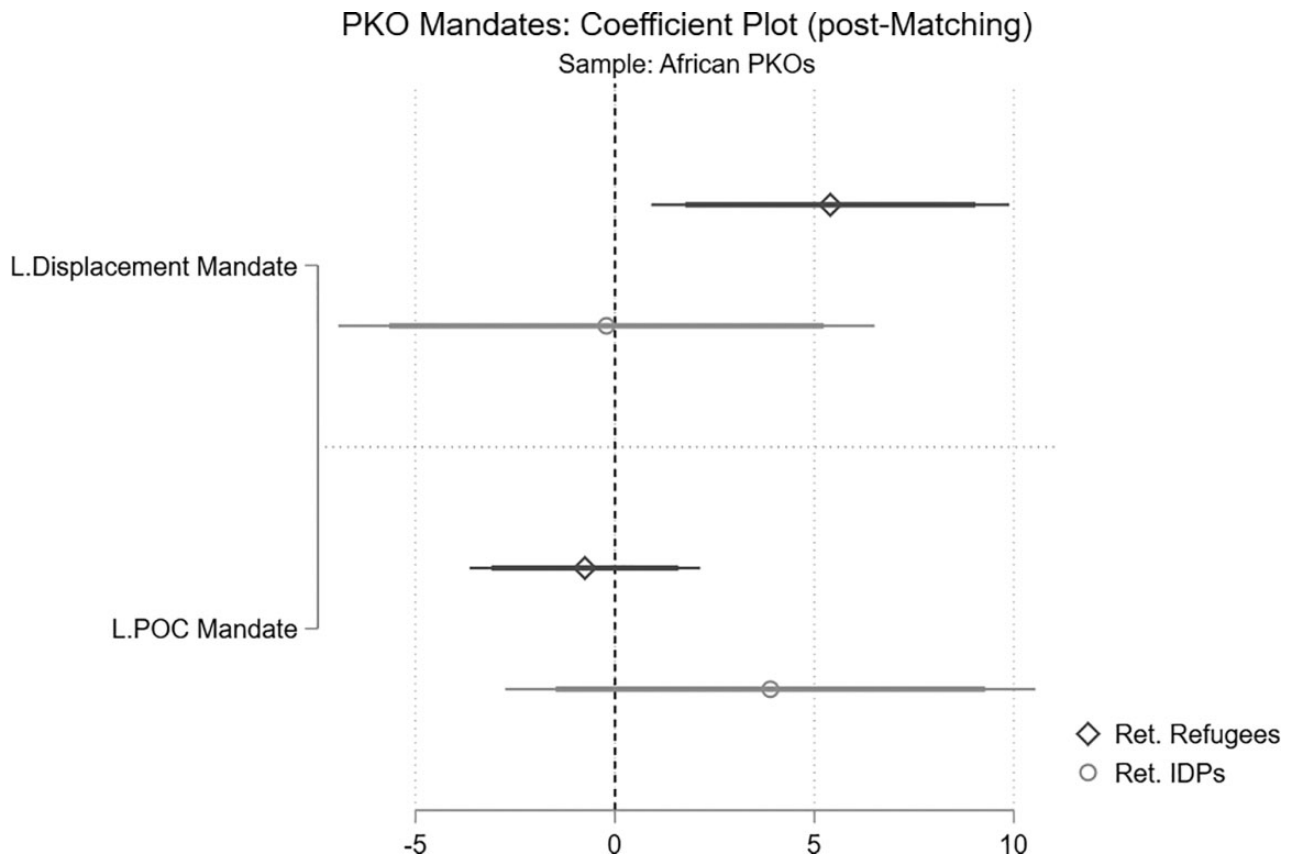


Figure 7. UN peacekeeping operation mandates: Impact on returning refugees and IDP flows: 90% and 95% confidence intervals

situation on the ground and the level of security are very likely to play a crucial role in this complex process and according to our aspiration–ability framework peacekeeping missions are more likely to influence returns than forced migrations. In this first analysis on the relation between peacekeeping and returns, we find that the presence of the peacekeeping missions (Figure 6) included in our sample may stimulate refugee returns (but not the return of IDPs), while larger missions are associated with more inflows of IDPs but not of refugees, providing partial support for Hypothesis 2. In Figure 7, we show the coefficients for UN missions' mandates and find that there is at least one significant correlation between missions' mandate and inflows. Displacement mandates increase the number of returning refugees (as expected in Hypothesis 6), but not the number of returned IDPs. However, UN missions with PoC mandates do not correlate with more returns.

Summarizing our findings, this first global analysis shows that UN missions so far have had complex and heterogeneous relations with forced displacement. As suggested by our theoretical framework, peacekeeping

missions seem more effective at encouraging returns than avoiding displacement. At the same time, UN missions seem more able to influence flows of IDPs than flows of refugees. This is probably because influencing the aspirations and abilities of IDPs is relatively easier than influencing refugees. First, displaced people who are still in the country can better observe the actions of peacekeeping missions – which on average improve the security conditions – and so change their aspirations to return accordingly. Second, for those who have not been displaced yet, building on Schon (2020), our intuition is that potential IDPs and potential refugees have different abilities to leave. The former are on average more disadvantaged people, who can count on fewer resource endowments and weaker or no transnational networks. Thus, they are more directly affected by how peacekeeping may change security conditions in their home country.

Moreover, UN missions' mandates do matter for flows of displaced people, but also this relation displays some heterogeneity. If tailoring UN missions carefully seems important to address forced displacement in the

future, our analysis shows that, overall, the peace missions have not been very effective at dealing with this crucial phenomenon. The protection mandate does not relate to IDP and refugee flows, and there are no clear associations between PoC mandates and returnee dynamics. On the other hand, the results for displacement-support mandates show that these missions are associated with a decline in IDP outflows and an increase in returning refugees.

Conclusion

Forced displacement is one of the main humanitarian issues in contemporary international politics, involving more than 80 million people (UNHCR, 2021). UN peacekeeping operations are one of the major tools available to the international community to stop conflict, but are they able to effectively help refugees and IDPs? Are the UN missions associated with smaller outflows of refugees and IDPs or larger inflows of returnees? Can the international community use this tool and improve the features of UN missions to reduce the suffering of displaced people?

In January 2022 Mr El-Ghassim Wane, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for MINUSMA, claimed that the absence of the UN operation would have led to a worse humanitarian situation in Mali: ‘Despite these challenges, the situation would have been far worse without the engagement of the international community, including the deployment of the UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA) in 2013 [. . .] In just one year, the number of Internally Displaced Persons [. . .] increased from 216,000 to more than 400,000.’¹⁸ On the other hand, there are examples of newspapers stressing the perceived failure of the UN in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: ‘[MONUSCO] disarmed more than a thousand rebels [. . .] but failed to prevent the displacement of nearly a million people, 1,400 civilian deaths and 7,500 rapes.’¹⁹

Despite the crucial policy relevance of addressing contrasting views, such as those mentioned above, on whether peace missions can tackle one of the most pressing global humanitarian issues, and assessing their effectiveness for this purpose, there is almost no research on this topic. This article provides the first large-N empirical study of

the relationship between UN peacekeeping operations and flows of refugees and IDPs leaving their homes in conflict-affected countries and their return. Using UNHCR data – a far from perfect data source, but yet the best data for a global and comparative analysis – from 1998 to 2015 and relating to 74 conflict-ridden countries, we find a complex relationship between flows of forcibly displaced people and UN peacekeeping missions.

The presence of a UN mission does not affect the outflows, either of IDPs or refugees, whereas large UN peace missions are associated with decreasing IDPs. The predicted reduction of IDP flows is not marginal, as moving from 0 to 500 UN troops reduces IDP outflows by approximately 80%. Mitigating the non-random deployment of UN missions using matching, we show that the presence of a UN mission is associated with more refugee returns, while larger peace missions are associated with more IDPs returning.

However, we also show that much depends on the specific mandates of the missions. In fact, moving forward from the currently available literature on peacekeeping effectiveness, our research also investigates the relative effectiveness of missions with different mandates, thanks to an original dataset on the mandates of UN peacekeeping operations. Our analysis of peace missions with different mandates confirms that addressing flows of forcibly displaced people is a complex matter. UN missions with mandates to protect civilians are neither associated with smaller flows of refugees nor with fewer IDPs, but UN missions with mandates focused on displacement are associated with smaller flows. Changes in displacement mandates show – with significant but large confidence intervals – a 90% reduction in IDP flows.

Yet, we also find signs of hope for the future because UN peacekeeping operations seem to be more effective at favouring the return of refugees and IDPs. More research is needed to investigate the causes of this difference, but anecdotal evidence of missions discussed above suggests that trust in the effectiveness of peace missions takes time to emerge, and therefore that civilians who have been exposed to violence might decide to leave anyway. On the other hand, displaced people considering return have had time to evaluate the evolution of the situation and recognize the role of peace missions.

Taking stock of these heterogenous results, and possibly carrying out more research on these topics, seems essential to improve the effectiveness of UN peace missions in their work to counter the massive flows of forced displacement. For instance, our macro and aggregate data approach should be combined in the future with local and micro analyses that have started to study subnational

¹⁸ UN News, January 2022 ‘Mali: Security Council warned of ‘endless cycle of instability’ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1109552>.

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/aug/01/un-congo-drc-goma-violence>

patterns of forcibly displaced people (see Zhou & Shaver, 2021), but yet more time-varying data is needed to understand variation of outflows and inflows. Additional research on dynamics of returns is also needed to fully establish the complex dynamics of forced displacement, because while UN missions designed to protect civilians are not associated with larger flows of returnees, missions with displacement-focused mandates are associated with larger inflows of refugees (but not IDPs). Finally, we find that peacekeeping cannot contain refugee flows regardless of the missions' size and mandates; this does not mean, however, that other work done by UN agencies on the ground, often enabled by the peacekeeping security umbrella, does not make a difference. Future research can shed more light on how enabling humanitarian work (e.g. UNHCR activities) can shape refugee flows.

Over the last decade, the UN – and its member states – have become hesitant to deploy new peace missions, despite the dramatic increase of conflicts recorded around the world (Pettersson et al., 2021). Part of the literature has stressed that UN operations overstretched their actions and mandates aiming for state building and often full governance (e.g. Chandler, 2017). However, our research shows that mandates aiming to protect forcibly displaced people and facilitate their return can be effective. The international community cannot learn the wrong lesson from past mistakes and retreat from areas and tasks where the UN can make a difference, such as forcibly displaced people. Rather, more research and collaboration between researchers and the policymaking community would be needed in this crucial and complex area to improve the performance of UN missions and make sure they are provided the right resources.

Replication data

The dataset, codebook and do-files for the empirical analysis in this article, along with the Online appendix, can be found at <http://www.prio.org/jpr/datasets>.

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